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THE STATE IS A LIMITATION ON HUMAN EXISTENCE.

AN INTERVIEW WITH SIMON CRITCHLEY

Krisis, 2008, Issue 2

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This interview was occasioned by two events. The first was the publication of *Infinitely Demanding*, Simon Critchley's new book that concisely formulates the views that he developed over the last decade on the relation between politics and ethics. The second was his visit to the University of Amsterdam in June 2008, at which time he agreed to do this interview.

Simon Critchley (1960) has established a long track record in both publications and institutional affiliations. In the early nineties he published an edited volume on Levinas (together with Robert Bernasconi) and a monograph on the ethics of deconstruction in Levinas and Derrida, a revised version of the Ph.D. thesis he defended at the University of Essex. By now, he has authored more than a dozen books, among which the well-known *Very littlealmost nothing* (1997) and *On Humour* (2002 – available in Dutch, together with the translation of *Continental Philosophy. A Very Short Introduction* [2001]) to the more recent *Things Merely Are* (2005), *The Book of Dead Philosophers* (2008, available in Dutch in 2009) and *On Heidegger's Being and Time*, together with Reiner Schürmann. Critchley holds teaching posts on both sides of the Atlantic: he has been a professor of philosophy at the University of Essex since 1989, as well as at the New School for Social Research in New York since 2004. He also was a programme director at the Collège Internationale de Philosophie in Paris, from 1998–2004. In between, he held visiting profes-

sorships at Notre Dame, the Cardozo School of Law, Los Angeles, Sydney, Oslo, and Nijmegen. As from January 2009 he will be professor of philosophy at the University of Tilburg in the Netherlands, visiting a couple of times a year for intensive seminars.

The main problem that you address in your book is a so-called 'motivational deficit in liberal-democracy'. We have two questions with regard to your analysis of the motivational deficit. First, to what extent is there such a motivational deficit? You emphasize all sorts of informal local activities. Does this not suggest that there is a lot of motivation, interest and willingness to engage in political action? Is the problem of motivation then not a purely philosophical, Kantian problem that has disappeared on the local level of secular liberal democracies at least?

Secondly, you conceptualize the motivational deficit in distinctly ethical terms. Yet your main target is political: you criticize a particular conception of political life or political conviction, namely, the Bush administration. To what extent is your ethical interpretation of the motivational deficit adequate to address the political problems you identify? Put otherwise: how should we see the relation between the motivational deficit and the war on terror?

SC: The main claim I make is that there is a motivational deficit in secular liberal democracy, in its institutions, its habits. This is the problem or crisis in normal politics: a demotivation in multi-party politics and parliamentary politics. On the other hand, there is a remotivation at the level of non-governmental or non-parliamentary politics. New forms of politics have emerged – forms that I call 'neo-anarchist' – and that are successfully mobilizing political anger that no longer resonates with classical forms of politics.

The motivational deficit in liberal-democracy in relation to the Bush regime is complicated. There is not a necessary link between the two but we should note that the Bush regime has a lot of motivational power. It is a theological project: even though it makes noises of the secular type, say on human rights, it is doing politics through right-wing evangelism. That is one way of doing politics. I don't think that it is the best way of doing it;

it is the response on the left that interests me. The Bush regime understands the nature of politics or how popular fronts can be formed. They are good students of Carl Schmitt and even Gramsci: they understand how coalitions are built. With the Bush regime you know what you get, a clear Straussian agenda. There is an intellectual dignity to the project whatever you think of it. Left liberals in the US on the other hand have been clueless for thirty years. The opposition on the left is either sentimental or constitutional. Look at where all the American Habermassians have ended up: all they think of is law, legal issues, constitutional niceties. To that extent I am much more critical of the democratic party and the left liberals than I am of the Bush regime.

But has liberal democracy not been successful up to a certain degree? Of course, not everyone is included, but there has been a practical learning process in liberal-democratic states.

SC: One possibility is to stay in the framework of liberal-democracy and try to defend it against conservative undermining, and improve it. That is a good Habermassian response. I don't believe in it for a moment. I don't think there was an "Enlightenment project", as Habermas put it. In fact, I think that this is a weird version of history. It made sense as a response to the disaster of national-socialism, the need to engage in a *Normalisierung* of German philosophy and German politics. To that extent it has been successful. But elsewhere? Motivations are so much more complicated than Enlightenment norms, think of the strength of national, religious and ethnic affiliations...

But once you reject that liberal-democracy has been successful or has a potential for improvement, do you not end up with the old-fashioned idea of politics as directed against the state? Is real politics non-governmental, anti-institutional or anti-state politics? Should we forget about the state and institutions? Or is the problem or challenge rather that of linking institutional and legal politics with new forms of politics?

SC: The last option. But I begin with the ontological premise that the state is a limitation on human existence. I am against the state, law, bureaucracy and capital. I see anarchism as the only desirable way of organizing

politically. I have always been very suspicious of authoritarian forms of Marxism and crypto-authoritarian forms of Marxism in different guises. Anarchism for me is a practice of popular self-determination and its political form is federalist. I can imagine a series of moves that could be made to establish a radically federalist form of politics in for example Western Europe. You just decide to abolish all the nationalist state structures and have the EU or some loose framework in which there is local autonomy on the level of towns or regions. It would be like Gandhi's vision of India as consisting of a 100,000 self-governing villages. There is just not a will to do it, certainly not in established politics, because politicians would vote themselves out of existence. In my view, anarchism is not that unrealistic: it is a way of describing how people actually organize practically, doing things in localities all over the place. Its power is on the practical level, its weakness is theoretical. Anarchists are good at practice but not in theory, that is why the universities are full of Marxists. Marxism works perfectly in the university machine. But if you push anarchists theoretically, it is often not very interesting. 'Too much apple pie', as I put it in my book *Infinitely Demanding*.

Can we give you a Gramscian counter-example? Gramsci talked to laborers in factories trying to get them organized in an anarchist way, but he was resented by both laborers and the labor unions for thus disrupting and undermining the fragile bonds of labor solidarity that had been precariously established.. More generally, it is very unattractive to get organized in something like a Rätereublik, because it is unclear what it has to offer, and tends to be very unstable.

SC: The problem is that people have been ideologically cultivated to identify with the nation-state and its institutions. It is seemingly terrifying to think of an alternative to the nation-state. And although I have worked as a union activist, unions are not always the best allies: as we can see in the history of unions in the US, union activities can be very reactionary and conservative.

Now, to go back to the question of the state: I don't think a society without the state is the only desirable outcome in politics. As Schmitt said, there are two traditions in political thought: authoritarian and

anarchist. They both derive from conceptions of human nature. If you think human beings are wicked, you turn to an authoritarian conception of politics, the Hobbesian-Macchiavellian-Straussian line. That will always be more attractive to intellectuals because they think of themselves as having deeper insight into human nature and it corresponds to the wickedness we intellectuals tend to see all over the place. You then end up with a leftist Schmittianism, such as defended by Chantal Mouffe, who presents a Freudian anthropology that focuses on the wickedness of human beings. That is a convenient and easy position to defend, because you will never be contradicted by events. Anarchism, in contrast, is based upon a certain innocence and optimism about human nature, or better, about human capacities. In that sense I am an utopian and an optimist about what human beings are capable of and I look for that evidence or examples as to how human beings will freely and mutually cooperate outside the activities of the state.

Now, the question of linking new forms of politics and institutions has indeed become crucial. The sequence of politics from, say, 1999 to the anti-war demonstrations and the rest, is in many ways encountering the limits of the politics of protest. In the final chapter of *Infinitely Demanding*, I defend politics as the creation of ‘interstitial distance’ within the state.

What I am interested in is how new forms of political subjectivity are formed and created, how new spaces are opened, just like the politics of sexuality in the past couple of generations. This does not proceed at a distance of state but tries to force a space within the state. I have just spent ten days at home in England. Very depressing. The state saturates all areas of social life through surveillance to a degree that would have been unimaginable twenty years ago. It shocked me. If you cross London, you are photographed thirty times. There is thus no space in the state and politics consists in the creation of such a space around a demand and then articulating it in relation to the state. In the book I illustrate this with the indigenous rights movement in Mexico from the 1980s to the present. The classical category of resistance in Mexican politics, the peasant, had ceased to be effective. But there was the possibility of the creation of a new political subject, the indigenous, at a distance of the state. This happened

by using the lever of the right to create that distance. Rights are levers of political articulation.

My concept of politics thus differs from a theorist like Rancière, who is after a more ethics-free conception of politics. Rancière’s concept of politics is descriptively powerful of certain situations, such as the protests against the French in Algeria, which for him is a paradigmatic case. But politics for him is a spontaneous emergence of ‘la politique’, there is no normative framework or notion of ethical subjectivity around which you can build such a notion of politics. For him that would be just another symptom of nihilism. Mouffe wants a Schmittianism without Catholicism which is completely implausible, because Catholicism is what is doing the motivational work for Schmitt.

You strongly emphasize that new forms of political subjectivity need to be theorized in an ethical vocabulary rather than purely political terms. With regard to the linkage between ontology and politics you take a radically different stance. For instance, you reject a conceptualization of an ontology of the social in favor of purely political terms. Is that not a dangerous strategy given the current political predicament? Both individualist right-based conceptions of state-centered liberalism as well as strong conceptions of community as defended by, say, the teleological civilizationists and neo-Schmittians, lay a claim on social life. Resistance against these hegemonic projects, as Gramsci suggested, proceeds through coalitions that need some sort of practice-based action such as habits and rituals. Do philosophers not have a role in cultivating some ontological premises that bring into light a conception of social practice that is neither individualist nor communitarian? Is an ontology-free conception of politics not overly vulnerable?

SC: Yes, such a conception is vulnerable. There is no ontology that can be appealed to as a basis for organizing political life, whether that is Negri’s idea of the multitude or Habermas’s idea of communicative rationality. I reject the search for guarantees or deeper structures that underlie political activities. This is why I am interested in a philosopher like Badiou: he makes the ontological question as uninteresting as possible. The ontological questions are just explained by set theory because for him that is

the best language we have to express being qua being. Regardless of whether that is true or not, the consequence of that is a radical deflation of the ontological question. For Badiou, the philosophical question is not about producing events but about describing the conditions under which events have happened or might happen. I find that much more appealing: There is no transitivity between ontology and politics.

I am arguing against strong ontological readings of Marx that are based on his idea of species-being (*Gattungswesen*) but particularly against Hardt and Negri. For a Spinozist like Negri there is one substance: nature or the multitude. The present condition is under the reign of empire but it *will* shift to multitude. There is of course a change of the modality of the substance, but the ontology is doing the work. I am as suspicious of that as I am of the ontologization of politics in Heidegger. Heidegger's idea is that if you get the fundamental ontology in place, this can then be elaborated on the level of political engagement. That is what he did in 1933 and that partly explains why I argue for a separation between politics and ontology. Another example that worries me is William Connolly's attempt to place a vitalist metaphysics at the heart of politics. Connolly appeals to neural networks to explain political engagement. Much as I like Bill's work and person, I find that a naturalistic delusion of a serious order. Politics is about politics. Gramsci understood that: politics is about forging coalitions and there is no support on the ontological level or logic of history that is going to do anything. Even though Badiou is not a reader of Gramsci you find this in Badiou as well: events are constructed by the people without an ontological support. Such is my position. Now, I am in the process of qualifying this a bit: the construction of such events could be called ontological. Badiou and I had a debate about this very issue which is available online.¹ But I am now prepared to concede that the creation of political subjectivity is about the ontology of the new and you could give a Foucaultian twist to that if that turns you on.

So you are in between pure spontaneous happenings, as argued for by Rancière, and stable ontologies. Is this why you emphasize the ethical moment, because it gives some stability and does not leave everything to chance?

SC: I don't use the word stable. You often hear theorists say that true politics is rare. That is a Heideggerian trope which we can do without. That is just not true sociologically speaking, there are all sorts of things happening. And people are doing these things not on the basis of purely political imperatives but usually on the basis of ideas of responsibility, responding to certain wrongs and injustice in mainly ethical frameworks. The theoretical task is complicated: on the one hand, I want to describe things that are actually happening but on the other hand, I give a normative recommendation. My belief about ethics is that it is in the business of giving recommendations and nothing more. Ethics is not like logic that is true in virtue of its form or natural science that is true in virtue of its verified validity. Normative considerations are true in virtue of being recommended and accepted as such. Nothing is doing the work behind our back; once again, that is my worry about Habermasian approaches. Furthermore, if ethics would give more than recommendations it would be against a conception of freedom: you cannot force people to be free as Rousseau wished. Therefore I am trying to give a picture of ethical subjectivity drawing on Lacan, Badiou and Løgstrup. It is perhaps an overly philosophical image but what it comes down to for me is anarchism. Today, on the way in from Amsterdam's central station, I saw an anarchist slogan on the wall: 'Freedom lives when the state dies'. That is the classical anarchist position. I am arguing for an anarchism of responsibility, a Levinasian anarchism. Anarchism in the sixties was libertarian and organized around issues of sexual liberation. That moment has passed. People are and should be organizing around responsibility.

Let us go back to Gramsci again. During the seventies many people found Gramsci liberating because of his emphasis on the importance of civil society as against the omnipresent state. Do you believe in the existence of a civil society? Let us specify this question with an example. There was a big research project done in The Netherlands on state initiatives with regard to the integration of minorities. The result of this project showed that integration was largely successful but integration policy was mainly unsuccessful. This suggests that there is something like a civil society, which has some authority over individuals and acts behind our backs.

SC: Yes, there is a civil society and Gramsci was very eloquent in describing that. The difficulty is that civil society can also yield forms of authoritarianism: it depends on the context. Take integration. One image of England is based around the notion of the integrated commercial city with London as a paradigm case. You can imagine describing that like Homi Bhabha does: putting emphasis on the emergence of hybrid cultures. I sometimes believe that. But then you have 7/7, the so-called terrorist attacks in London by second generation working-class Muslims from the depressed north of England. This leads to a different picture of civil society, which puts more stress on exclusion. Yet, I remain essentially positive about civil society. There is something endlessly creative and fascinating to it. Not for nothing, I am currently writing a book on Rousseau that circles around the catechism of citizenship.

*By way of conclusion, could you elaborate on this catechism a bit? In how far does your new book on citizenship differ from the political ethics you developed in *Infinitely Demanding*?*


It is an attempt to develop the position in *Infinitely Demanding* into questions about the relation between three concepts: politics, law and religion. A version comes out in German in September with Diaphanes, though I am still working on the argument. Very simply, this research is about the relation between politics and belief. I argue that there is no politics worthy of the name without the experience of something like belief. As Oscar Wilde says, 'Every thing to be true must become a religion.' I try and show the necessity for a moment of *sacralization* in the constitution of any polity and lay out a history of such sacralization, with historical examples of civil religion from the ancient Greeks through to American democracy, state socialism, current often vacuous debates about European identity and the spectre of Jihadism. Using Rousseau as a guide, I will show in detail how politics and law require something like religion to bind citizens together. This is what I call 'the catechism of the citizen'. Such a model of politics significantly challenges the standard left-liberal secularization narrative. I conclude by criticizing the contemporary theologization of politics, arguing instead for belief at the level of poetry rather than religion. This leads to the closing hypothesis of what I call 'a politics of the supreme fiction', where I try and draw together my work

on poetry, particularly Wallace Stevens, that I have been engaged in for years with my interest in politics. To be honest, I am not sure at this stage if my argument is plausible. I am going to try and work it out in my teaching this autumn.

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¹ 'Democracy and Disappointment: Alain Badiou and Simon Critchley on the Politics of Resistance'. Debate on November 15, 2007, at the Slought Foundation, Philadelphia. Available at <http://slought.org/content/11385/>.